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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the practices and ideologies held in common by the African colonial system of education and the urban American educational system. It is advocated that the following ideas be applied from the American colonial experience to improve American ghetto schools: (1) a continued effort in assisting the American black family to provide the child with an atmosphere of warmth and security should be continued; (2) more recognition of the value of the child's background should be given and used in the child's upbringing and education; (3) ethnic education should be instituted to provide children with pride in their heritage and background; (4) school administrators and teachers should be carefully screened for understanding of the child's background and community; (5) better reward methods for education should be sought; (6) English should be taught in the school as a second language; (7) the idea of providing the same public education for everybody should be substituted for education centered around the needs of the community; (8) a systematic approach to training children in the skills of taking tests should be effected; (9) the curriculum should heavily employ the community and its resources in its development; and (10) alternative methods for financing the schools hould be employed. (Author/JM)

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A COMPARISON OF EDUCATIONAL AND CHILD-REARING PRACTICES OF URBAN AMERICA AND BRITISH COLONIAL AFRICA

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A COMPARISON OF EDUCATION AND CHILD-REARING PRACTICES IN BRITISH COLONIAL AFRICA AND URBAN AMERICA

The purpose of this paper is to describe the practices and ideologies held in common by the African colonial system of education and the urban American educational system. African resistance to the loss of their cultural values and solutions to the educational dilemmas of urban black families will be offered.

The major purpose of the British colonial education was to prepare the African to serve the foreign master: the European colonist. "To make money the Europeans needed African labor, but Africans did not want to work for Europeans. Only when Africans acquired Western incentives would they provide a dependable labour force.[1] In fact, "Colonialism was trade, investment and enterprise for the benefit of an alien society."[2] To acquire their end, the Africans were relentlessly exploited with only a minimal benefit to the labourers.

A deliberate attempt was made to replace the Africans' traditional tribal values with European economic values. More often this practice failed to instill European values while creating confusion and ambivalence in regard to tribal values, which resulted in individuals who adhered to neither standard.

The African child was led to reject tribal values as primitive, uncivilized and savage. The idea of savagery was even fostered and perpetuated by the missionaries who incorporated the idea in the gospel they spread.[3] No adequate

replacement for the traditional values was ever provided. Education was not for personal development but for the purpose of producing efficient and productive members of the labor force. It was the avenue and socialization tool to British values.

The resistance to internalization of European values was compounded by the nature of the African value system; a system which emphasized the family and a self-sufficient agrarian economy.

With a full realization that adequate education would upset the delicate balance of what they intended to accomplish, the British never intended to develop massive well-developed educational systems. The motive was to provide economic support without awakening a desire in the Africans for freedom and self-determination.

> "Historically, colonial governments did not take the initiatives to provide the education for non-literate Africans. It was recognized that if people learned to read and write they would be less willing to remain under foreign colonial control. Plantation owners were generally not interested in education because they feared that educated workers would not remain on the plantation for only five or ten or fifteen cents a day cash wages. Business firms were generally not interested in too much education for Africans, thinking primarily of how increased taxes and demands for better working conditions would affect immediate business profits."[4]

Examination of inner-city education in the United States provides a parallel case in which the dominant culture has attempted to substitute its values for that of the other culture by design or by circumstances. This has created the dilemma of the middle-class black in America, wherein a

person achieving economic success often stands apart from black people and is viewed with distrust. He is neither accepted as a total person by whites nor secure in his place within the black community.

The nature of American industrialized society necessitated ghetto schools to socialize children to white middle-class values, e.g. competition, ambition, punctuality and material values.

The traditional values and wisdom of the black Southern family were eroded and nothing of value was offered to replace them. The schools played a major part in this process. Material desires were heightened by presenting the middle-class cultural milieu as part of the curriculum. The thwarting of the revolution of rising expectations created by the schools has led to frustration and resentment. The schools have prepared black youth for a role that does not exist.

The major mode of socialization is the language. The colonial schools emphasized the language of their mother land and disregarded or cast aside the tribal language as of little value in the so-called modern world.

The dominant culture has used the mode of communication very effectively in the ghetto schools. For example, Spanish has not been greatly used in the schools which Puerto Rican and Mexican-American children attend.

> "I would like to see schools in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods be forced, because of their relationship to the community, to put up signs saying "Se Habla Espanol" as quickly as every store in the community had to put up one in order to stay in business. I have seen stores do this in one or two days, but

> schools spend fifteen years in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood without a single Spanish-speaking teacher in the school. The teachers merely speak English louder, and the louder they talk, the less the pupils understand them -- so the more ignorant the pupils are."[5]

In the black ghetto the language of the child is considered "non-standard" and not appropriate for classroom communication. The child is generally penalized for using it no matter how colorful or appropriate it may be. To quote one writer, "The greatest block to the realization of the deprived individual's creative potential appears to be his verbal inadequacies. He seems to have enormous difficulties expressing himself verbally in many situations."[6] This blatant disrespect for the language of the cultural milieu reveals the prevalence of middle-class culture which dominates ghetto schools. The teachers often do not even attempt to understand the language of the child.

Cannon points out that dialectical objectivity is not often a part of teacher training programs, so that teachers are seldom able to take advantage of the dialect-switching versatility that students are often capable of. The teacher is often at a greater disadvantage than the students who assumedly had at least been exposed to middle-class speech patterns through television, for example.[7]

A study by Marwit and Marwit found that black students from the inner-city spoke in a predictable language pattern which was just as systematic in its rules governing grammatical usage as standard American English. Their study of seven-year-olds found these language patterns to be highly

reliable and thoroughly internalized by this age. They recommend that which is seldom practiced: understanding and acceptance of the child's unique linguistic system.[8]

The depreciation of the vernacular of the child is symptomatic of the loss of esteem and self-respect which the child in the ghetto school and the colonial school inevitably suffer. Development of a healthy self-image is a difficult task under such conditions.

The attempt of the British to transfer their educational system in toto to Africa included all the rites of passage of the British system. The exit examination which in large measure determined the future of the child was the Cambridge School Certificate Examination, an examination which was developed and prepared in England with the English child in mind. The examinations were exported to Africa without modification or consideration for the cultural environment of the child.

Similarly, the tests that determine the placement of the black child, whether it be in special education, the academic track in high school or college entrance examinations, were all formulated and validated for the white middle-class child. The significance of the standardized test in determining the future of a child can hardly be underestimated when one considers the requirements for entry into jobs, the professions and prestige schools. Attempting to break out of the poverty culture becomes a vicious circle for the child

denied opportunity for higher education and thus entrance into the professions and economic success.

The teachers in the colonial schools in Africa were generally brought from the British Isles to Africa. They viewed their students with condescension, seeing their role in a missionary light: that of "civilizing" the natives.

> "There is an enormous gap between the standards of living of the Europeans and those of the overwhelming majority of Bantu. The lives of the vast majority are regulated by superstition and witchcraft. They are deficit in the higher ethical sanctions and moral standards associated with civilized religions. The vast majority are very poor. Even supposing the rank and file appreciated the value of education, which they do not, their poverty would make it impossible for them to provide the necessary funds to equip and maintain schools and pay teacher salaries."9

The children in such circumstances grow up viewing their culture as inferior, again internalizing a self-deprecating view. The African culture was de-emphasized and a deliberate attempt to modify to the European style was made. In many cases the modification was so thorough that the African culture was nearly annihilated. Rarely were the priorities and strengths of the indigenous culture emphasized. Thus the child grew up with great admiration for the white culture, which he could not really understand or internalize.

Education was prescribed following a rigid syllabus which was heavily laden with British values. Education was not meaningful to the child's background nor was his background considered in developing the curriculum. Instruction was conducted exactly as it had been in Birmingham or Manchester.

This situation has an analogy in many inner-city schools in which the teachers come from outside the community and do not attempt to relate to the background of the students. They have no knowledge of the community and its values. The teacher or administrator living within the school community is a rarity, the majority hurry away to a suburban enclave. These ghetto aliens are likely to view their own lifestyle as superior to that of their students. Again a situation was created in which the self-esteem of the child was damaged.

Financial considerations always play a primary role in structuring of a school system. In colonial Africa, schools inevitably faced inadequate financing. Students' needs for adequate equipment and supplies were generally unmet. The financing of these schools was generally the responsibility of colonial government, which was heavily dependent on the mother country and its largess for support, or the missionary socities, which were also dependent for support and funds from religious organizations in Britain. The missionaries themselves were more interested in saving souls than in providing a first-rate or even adequate educational setting for their African students. These schools also operated on a fee basis, which the majority of students' families couldn't pay alone. Students were forced to seek aid from the various local government bodies in the form of bursaries. Since the colonial governments were more interested in getting able bodied workers than providing an education, the bursaries were an uncertain means of support.[10]

Similarly in Urban America the schools have often been severely deprived in terms of staffing, equipment and facilities. Cases have even been recorded wherein public schools in the inner-city have conducted book drives because students didn't even have textbooks or an adequate library. Expenditures generally lag behind that of surrounding districts.[11]

The schools were almost always racially segregated in the colonial system.[12] The schools for Europeans were usually the advantaged schools with good facilities, teachers and curriculum; the Asian schools were next in order of excellence of facilities and staff; and the African schools were lowest on the totem pole of quality.

Inner-city schools, while not legally segregated in recent years, have nevertheless been segregated in fact with all the educational advantages accruing to the white suburban schools. All attempts to integrate or equalize urban and suburban education have been dismal failures.

Implications for the Urban Child

The African child was thus raised in an atmosphere which was intentionally programmed for entry into a service or substandard existence, yet often these tremendous odds against the child were overcome. Many grew up to become leaders of their nations in the fight for independence from British rule and otherwise ably serve their people.

An examination of the facts show that the self-image of the African child was not substantially destroyed by the

British colonial educational system. The children quickly learned to play the game and differentiate between school needs and life needs. The resistance to the destructiveness of the British system can largely be attributed to the supportiveness and stability of the African family structure. Unlike urban ghetto families, the African extended family was large, warm and powerful. The individual's major intention was to uphold the family image and name. Any negative behavior on the part of the individual was reflected back on the entire family.

The family system had built into it disciplinary measures which were communicated to the child early in life, so that the child knew in advance what the consequences of his unacceptable behavior would be. Growing up in an African family is like having Big Brother always watching you. Any member of the extended family, no matter how remotely related, was responsible for bringing up the child and took this work seriously. As a result there was very little delinquency amongst the boys and almost none among the girls.

In addition, the African community had well-founded values, codes of conduct and expectations that a child was socialized into. The child learned the expected roles and thoroughly mastered such roles. They were exposed to the proper model which was exemplified by the stable mother and father, brothers and sisters as well as all other members of the extended family. Family roles were well-delineated, with each member knowing exactly what was expected. Most of

these expectations were dictated by tribal customs. By the time the child started school, ages 7-15 years, these values were so deeply ingrained that replacing them or changing them became very difficult. The socialization process was never left to the schools or any other institution.

The school was basically expected to teach basic skills (the three R's). The African child, thus, knew what they could expect from school and how to behave. Ironically, the African family almost always supported school efforts with the teacher enjoying high social status in the community. The child was led to believe (in most cases correctly) that formal education was the only way out of poverty. A special need and a higher value on education was established.

The child understood that at the conclusion of the formal education, there would be a job. African culture also highly cherished the ability to read and write, unlike the ghetto where school expectations and needs are not clear and rewards are not apparent. In the African society examples of success created through education were plentiful and visible in the largely agrarian society.

The self-sufficiency of the agrarian economy probably was a major factor in saving the African family from destruction. The family had a well-established welfare system in which the aged, the relatives of the deceased, the orphaned, the incompetent and the ill were automatically provided for by the extended family. No vicious government welfare system, as is present in the United States that makes normal family

life impossible, was in existence nor necessary. Individuals always knew that their basic needs would be taken care of as they arose. Thus, a sense of security was developed in the child.

Although the educational content did not seem to regard the child's background and under ordinary circumstances would have resulted in resentment of the materials, it seems that just the opposite occurred. Students were highly motivated and struggled through materials presented to learn all they could. The study of Macbeth and English Literature were accepted as necessary evils. Even school itself was accepted as a necessary evil, and students knew and understood they went to school to suffer through and learn something in the process. Again the idea that schooling was the only sure way out of poverty and the support afforded the school by the community were the major contributing factors in the high motivation apparent in the students.

Without question, the emphasized language in the colonial schools was that of the mother land. Under ordinary circumstances, it would appear that this would deter learning amongst the Africans. But various factors worked in favor of using the foreign language as the instructional language. In the schools many tribal groups, which often were rivals, represented diverse languages and dialects which would have made it difficult to adopt one of the tribal languages as the language of instruction. A neutral language like English was more readily accepted than the use of one tribal language

would have been. In fact, most students were proud to learn and master the foreign language.

The fact that most of the African communities had no say in school affairs meant that the school could practically teach whatever they wanted. Teaching of the foreign language came from on high as a decree, and everyone accepted it and struggled to learn it. One factor that worked in favor of the Africans was that since most schools were segregated, the competition within the school was among people with an equal disadvantage. All had to learn the language at the same time. The unequal conditions found in the United States because of the child's social class as reflected in the language never played a major part. There was, however, a slight reflection when the exit exams were compared. The English schools naturally did well, followed by the African schools and then by the Asian schools. The exit exams, however, resulted in a lot of unnecessary educational casualties.

The examinations at various levels were cooperative and given to all children disregarding nationality or origin. Entry to the next level of education was determined by these exams. It appeared from the results that Africans fared comparatively well, particularly at the secondary school level.

The cultural degradation practiced by the British did not result in a complete destruction of the culture simply because they did not have a long enough time to effect this. Independence arrived before destruction took place. Lingering signs of the damages inflicted can still be observed in some of the African nations.

What Can be Learned from the African Experience

The following ideas can be applied from the African colonial experience to improve American ghetto schools:

1. Although the American black family has come a long way in its reconstruction and reconstitution since the slave masters' dismantlement, a continued effort in assisting the family through counseling and other assistance to provide the child with an atmosphere of warmth and security should be continued. Education for parenthood should be escalated and supportive institutions involved in this effort should be well-coordinated. The institutions that have taken the responsibilities of the extended family should be recognized and effectively used. Their functions should be delineated and exploited.

2. More recognition of the value of the child's background should be given and used in the child's upbringing and education. Teachers and administrators should be trained in these values and how to deal with them in the classroom.

3. Ethnic education should be instituted to provide children with pride in their heritage and background. This would lay the foundation for better self-image development. The children need to know where they came from and where they are going in the future to develop better understanding of themselves.

4. School administrators and teachers should be carefully screened. Those with less understanding of the child's background and community should be released from working in these

areas. Those with condescending attitudes should seek employment elsewhere. The employees of the schools are critical in molding the child's future.

5. Since currently afforded rewards for education are not greatly successful, better reward methods should be sought. The need for education should be established and communicated to the child.

6. English should be taught in the school as a second language to ensure acquisition of the necessary language skills for future utilization. Capitalization on the child's existing language should be made and the child's expressions should be translated into standard English without degrading the child's own language. Where the child lacks the necessary background concepts for language acquisition, these should be immediately provided.

7. The public school education should be re-examined. The idea of providing same education for everybody should be substituted with education centered around the needs of the community since different communities demand different needs.

8. Since the educational establishment will probably not soon create tests appropriate for inner-city children, a systematic approach to training children in the skills of taking tests should be effected.

9. The curriculum, though including other skills necessary nationwide, should heavily employ the community and its resources in its development. Human and material resources should be incorporated. The expected outcomes should be well

understood by the child, the community and school personnel. The needs of the child should be examined before prescribing for them.

10. Alternative methods for financing the schools should be employed to ensure equality of education. Suggestions similar to those in Hunter's book or Spratten's article could be a starting point for improving financing of city schools.

In conclusion, the two systems are suppressive and seen to be programmed for substandard education. Africans had methods that helped them resist and cope with the unpleasant situation that they had. They were thus able to resist the seemingly inevitable destruction. It is hoped that inner-city communities will develop survival modes which will enable them to better surmount the present oppressive conditions in the city.

FOOTNOTES

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11. Spratten, Thaddeus. "Financing Inner City Schools: Policy Aspects of Economics, Political and Racial Disparity." Journal of Negro Education, Summer, 1973, p. 283-307.

12. Hunter, op. cit., p. 17.